

RAN study visit

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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN Study visit on Dealing with disruptive and escalating violent 'borderline' protest in the realm of the police P/CVE role

28 September 2023, Online

Dealing with disruptive and escalating violent 'borderline' protest in the realm of the police P/CVE role

Key outcomes

During this digital study visit, a group of police experts and officers conducted a small tour with "stopovers" in four European and one Canadian hotspot for disruptive and escalating violent protest. The aim was to learn about the different developments and trends in *borderline protest*, and the police responses – before, during and after, in the context of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). The key questions discussed were: what makes specific forms of protests concerning considering potential radicalisation and escalation into violence and extremism; what factors can contribute or prevent such escalation; and, what should be the police response? Several different forms of protests and tactics have been explored, including:

- environmental protests, blockades, property damage and critical infrastructure targeting
- COVID-19-related protests
- violent riots and far-left protests (e.g. at G20 summits)

What makes these protests and movements 'borderline' is the disruptive tactics employed, such as disruption of the economy and exhaustion of law enforcement resources, use of children in demonstrations, the infiltration of antagonists among demonstrators, as well as the rapid transformation of normal citizens into violent protesters. Key findings of the study visit are:

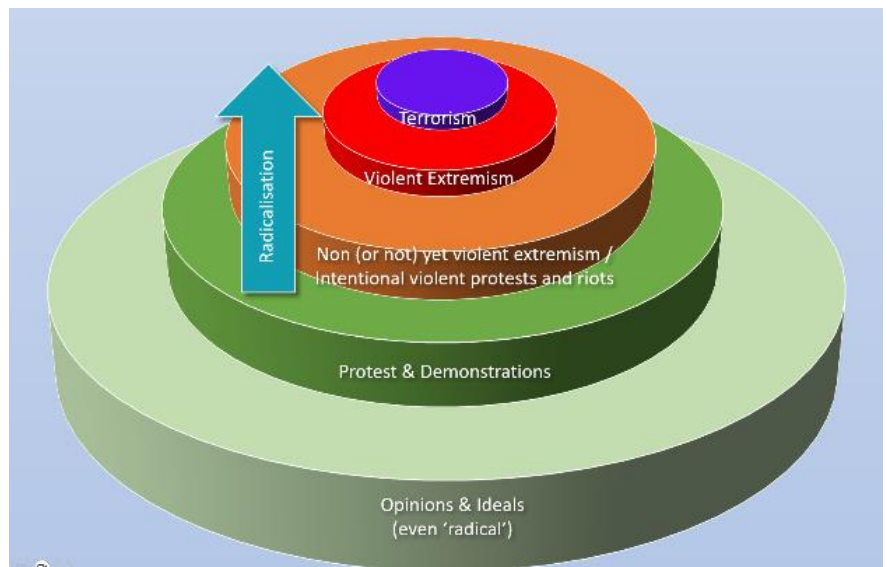
- Police forces across Europe and in North America are challenged with **new protest movements and trends** that do not happen in isolation but are part of national and global campaigns. These campaigns share tactics across borders; thus, more **cross-border exchange and mutual learning** is needed among law enforcement.
- Police forces are concerned with the **potential for escalation and growing violence**, especially on climate demonstrations.

- **A differentiated approaches** are needed to respond to different groups/actors in demonstrations, as well as for different types of protests to avoid further escalation and radicalisation, including regarding tactics applied by police (hard vs. soft security measures). 'Dialogue police' can greatly contribute to preventing escalation.
- The use of **administrative measures** to disrupt some protest movements' tactics, such as civil injunctions, as well as amplifying **credible voices** from community and businesses have also been mentioned as effective approaches.
- Change the way **police training** is approached, such as for riot management, is necessary to ensure better understanding of these new risks and integration of dialogue aspects.

Highlights of the discussion

What are borderline protests and why are they a concern for police and P/CVE?

Police all over Europe are confronted with tactics of protest and demonstrations that are challenging them in their role of facilitating democratic protests. For instance, there is a wave of disruptive forms of protest, like peaceful blockades of roads and other critical infrastructure, or disruptions in public events and places like museums and at sports events. Often this could be seen as a tactic of civil disobedience because the actions are deliberately **illegal but also non-violent**. The other form of protest that is posing a big challenge for police is protest actions where the demonstrators are **prepared to use violence** for their cause. Demonstrations therefore become the theatre for violent mobilisation and sabotage targeted at the subject of their political fight or the police.



All these could be described as disruptive and/ or escalated protest or **borderline protest**, i.e. protest bordering and having more or less an overlap with extremism. In Germany, for example, since the 1990s the protest scene has been shaped by issues such as migration, the environment and welfare and led to violent mobilisations and counter-mobilisations on the streets ⁽¹⁾. Scholars monitoring these developments, particularly through the lens of various strands of social movement studies, highlights that the way authorities (police) react, intervene, communicate and are being perceived, plays a role in processes of radicalisation and escalation that may go against the initial intention ⁽²⁾. The focus of the meeting was on police strategies in dealing with this form of **borderline protest through the lens of P/CVE**, and not on crowd management or public order.

What trends in borderline protests and police responses are observed in Europe and North America?

⁽¹⁾ [Political Protest and Radicalization \(MOTRA\)](#), Berlin Social Science Center.

⁽²⁾ Ellefsen, R. (2021) [The unintended consequences of escalated repression](#). *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 26(1):87-108, DOI: 10.17813/1086-671X-26-1-87.

United Kingdom: Environmental movements and the dominance of "Just Stop Oil"

During the virtual stopover in the United Kingdom (UK), participants were acquainted with the evolution of the UK environmental movement since 1991, key figures/organisations involved and tactics used, and connections/spillovers towards similar movements across Europe (within the A22 movement). The emphasis was then placed on the tactics used by Extinction Rebellion, and in particular Just Stop Oil (JSO), to increase membership.

- **Disruptive tactics used:** critical infrastructure targeting (tunnelling, blockades of oil terminals and strategic road networks/junctions), economic blockades, high profile disruption of major cultural and sports events, property damages (gas stations) resulting in significant economic losses and resource costs for police, courts and prisons.
- **Radicalisation/escalation trends:** manifestos on social media, role of influencers, personal goals transposed onto mass audience, criminality, seeking arrests, 2028 as "deadline" for the JSO.
- **Police responses and lessons:** specialised unit created, use of civil injunctions, differentiating the approach for factions in the demonstration.

Germany: From violent riots to mixed-crowd mass protests and environmental road blockings

- **Violent riots:** the 2017 G20 summit in Hamburg witnessed large protests in several locations around the city, including typical riots that turned violent, prompting mobilisation of 35,000 police force. These gathered not only local anti-globalisation protesters but also international from left-wing parties and extremists. **Tactics used:** violence vs police, and against public property, civilian buildings.
- **Largely peaceful, but illegal and unpredictable, mixed-crowds:** COVID-19 mass protests also involving children and elderly, largely peaceful, but unpredictable due to combination of ordinary citizens, different activist movements and extremist groups across the spectrum (right-wing extremists, left-wing extremists, Reichsbürger), and happening nationwide, large gatherings.
- **Illegal, but not violent, not radicalised:** environmental road blockades. **Police response:** They have been dealt with by traffic police.

Italy: Climate protests, right of housing movement

- **Environmental groups** engaging in direct actions such as Extinction Rebellion and Ultima Generazione that intensified its actions since 2022. However, these are mostly non-violent and not known to be linked to other extremist movements or actors.
 - **The tactics used** include disruption of public events, demonstrations in museums, blockades of roads, public property damages.
- **Groups for housing rights:** left-wing groups located in main cities.
 - **Tactics used:** illegal occupation of abandoned buildings. **Police responses:** mapping empty buildings and preventing illegal occupation, cooperation with social services and local administrations to find housing for families in need, and engaging in dialogue with activists and monitoring their activities.

Spain: Catalan independence movement, Radical environmentalists

- **Catalan independence movement:** key events such as the referendum for Catalan independence in 2018 and the arrest of Catalanian rapper Pablo Hasel in 2021 led to increased participation in the movement and triggered demonstrations and riots by its supporters and different left-wing, anti-fascist and anarchist groups.
 - **Tactics used:** Many protests started peacefully but turned into violence and clashes with police and destruction of property. The risk of radicalisation is still low, yet the quick mobilisation around key trigger events is concerning. **Police response:** Dialogue police are not utilised in Spain to de-escalate tension.
- **Radical environmental movements** such as Futuro Vegetal have intensified their actions to attract attention and new members, although violence is still low.
 - **Tactics used:** Main actions include attacking private and commercial vessels, destroying luxury cars, sabotage actions on buildings and famous art pieces, and actions against infrastructures like airports and main roads. **Police response:** surveillance and identification of activists around illegal actions, protection of buildings.

Canada: Freedom convoy protest

Canada was in January 2022 the scene of protest and blockades. What started off as a protest by truckers against COVID-19 border-crossing measures grew into several convoys of trucks, tractors and cars that blocked downtown Ottawa. It evolved into a broad coalition of truckers, known anti-government protesters and extremists. At the same time, provincial capitals and border crossings were also blockaded. In Ottawa there was a lot of intimidation and racist slurs. The protest rallied Parliament Hill to oust the government. Some described it as a siege or occupation.

- The puzzle of **available intelligence, assessment and operational decisions** wasn't made correctly. The trucks should not have been allowed to enter the city centre.
- There were some **extremist groups and symbols** present.
- Close to the blockade **a small group with firearms** was arrested.
- There was a lot of online and offline support for the demonstrations. Protesters causing problems or risks are a minority. There was support and funding from extreme-right persons and organisations abroad, mainly the United States.
- **Protesters brought children with them** in their vehicles. For tactical teams this eliminated the use of riot operations.
- **Dangerous environment** with all the heavy equipment, stashes of fuel, firearms, they threatened to use force (demonstrators).

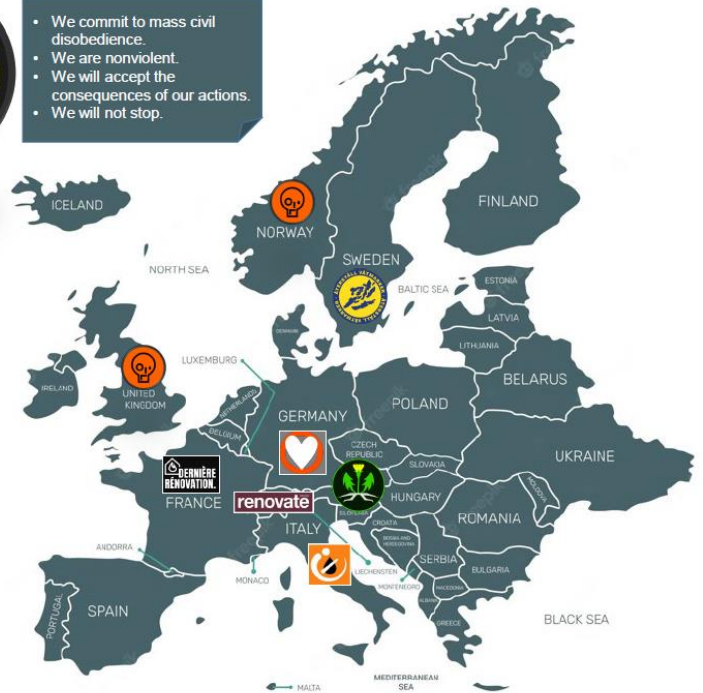
What are common concerns?

- Protest movements **sharing tactics and information across borders**. Police are often behind the curve, as they operate within borders. More cross-border police cooperation is needed. However, cooperation not in counterterrorism or countering violent extremism, but in the realm of protests that can lead to extremism.

- **Frequency and number** of these new protest forms, indicate they are **part of global and national campaigns**. This depletes resources, exhausts staff and disrupts normal policing, leading to overwhelming of systems. Law enforcement agencies need to replicate this approach.
- Increasing desperation in tactics used by demonstrators, such as the **use of children** in protests.
- **Flash transition/leap from benign citizens to violent protesters** at great speed, normal people are throwing themselves at the barricades.
- Trend of radical actors instrumentalising demonstrations. **Infiltration by antagonists** (other states or radicals) is difficult to recognise, prevent, or respond to.
- If protests become more violent, the police need to take more measures, the stairway of escalation needs stepping up, bringing in more surveillance — requires **discussion on democratic security**.



- We commit to mass civil disobedience.
- We are nonviolent.
- We will accept the consequences of our actions.
- We will not stop.



Recommendations

- **Using dialogue police** is a great tactic. Community police have relationships locally and are key in communication and de-escalation before and during protests, and they also have insights about actors/groups that intelligence does not have. However, in some cases violence is caused by loose groups that are difficult to locate and engage in dialogue. Furthermore, movements like the JSO will not speak to dialogue police.
- **Preparation and coordination:** ahead of demonstrations and protests, there needs to be good planning involving dialogue police and "communication teams" that will be on the ground and will interact/mediate with demonstrators and activists to communicate on what the police are doing, what next actions are. Also maintaining constant contact during protests between riot police and communication/dialogue teams to coordinate actions.
- **Clear communication** that the police are there to protect demonstrators, not the enemy. Use of social media and open-source intelligence, or OSINT, to understand next steps of movements, prevent fake news, explain what the police are doing — via social media but also on the streets.
- **Police training:** dialogue needs to be integrated in basic riot training — what is the role of the police, what are the rights of protesters, where is the line. Integrate into police training psychologists on crowd movement, leadership and formation of a group.
- **Better intelligence/understanding** of the profile of the group leadership behind disruptive protests. Often they know the tactics of the police and use them against the police. The UK National Police Coordination Centre's (NPoCC) role in risk assessment and sharing information on strategic protest activity, **protest thematics and groups represents a good approach, informing local and regional operations**. Information sharing between intelligence and police on the street is important.
- **Differentiated approach needed**, for different groups/actors in demonstrations, for instance the lower engaged supporters and protesters and the more engaged organisers, activists and influencers.

- **Also differentiate** for different types of protests to avoid further escalation and radicalisation — and a differentiation in tactics applied by the police.
 - It is not efficient to handle climate action/protests the same way as counterterrorism operations — e.g. via pre-emptive arrests, which can be seen as provocation in some cases. Arrest as prevention custody — actors affected will have more public influence.
 - Differentiation of hard and soft security measures (weapons, water cannons, etc.). Sometimes a matter for traffic police. Water cannons are a common tool of riot police, but not for all kinds of protests.
- **Using administrative measures** to disrupt some protest movements' tactics, such as civil injunctions.
- **Credible voices from community and businesses** can support a counter-narrative, showing how lives of normal citizens are disrupted by protest/demonstration actions and reducing public support for these.

Follow-up

- The role of dialogue police and take-up of dialogue aspects in training for public order police officers in different contexts.
- Information sharing cross-border on borderline protests – the UK suggested an initiative to foster further mutual learning with Europe.
- The conversation can be continued in the RAN POL meeting 12 and 13 October 2023, where there will be a mini training on Dialogue Policing.

Relevant practices

1. Dialogue police, Sweden

The Swedish police have incorporated the dialogue police as a tactic, in addition to the other police tactics for policing protests and political manifestations. The approach is based on the social identity theory, conflict reducing principles in combination with special police tactics. The approach enables the police to de-escalate protests. The Swedish police are training police forces in other countries to apply the approach.

2. NPoCC / Strategic Intelligence and Briefing (SIB), UK

The core responsibilities for public order are:

- to coordinate the sharing of intelligence and information for strategic protest activity;
- to identify and assess risk/threat from protest thematics and groups;
- to work with police forces and law enforcement partners nationally and internationally to mitigate risk;
- to work with law enforcement partners to gather and analyse information to support organisational learning.

The NPoCC SIB utilises a lead force model, working with police forces to enhance and inform local and regional operations. The NPoCC SIB maps the potential activity and propensity for criminality of participants within a protest movement. The NPoCC SIB seeks to prioritise the reduction of risk to events by identifying and mitigating criminal activity. Identify and assess the known and emerging risks. Assess the risks in terms of their likelihood and impact. Prioritise risk at a national level. Identify intelligence gaps and provide recommendations.

Further reading

- Strindberg, A. (2020). Chapter 3 'Why Social Identity Theory?', in: [Social Identity Theory and the Study of Terrorism and Violent Extremism](#). Swedish Defence Research Agency.
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- Global Counterterrorism Forum (2009). [Good Practices on Community Engagement and Community-Oriented Policing as Tools to Counter Violent Extremism](#).
- RAN POL (2022). [The challenges of anti-authorities extremism for police](#), Copenhagen 23-24 June 2022.